

Sermon Text – Sunday, September 6, 2026 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Ezekiel 33:7-11; 2nd Reading: Romans 13:8-14
Scripture for Message: Matthew 18:15-20 “SIN”

There are some passages of scripture that make me go HMMM, and this is one of those. I remember having preached on this scripture a couple of years back and still I have questions. I want to wrestle with what Jesus is saying here. If you too have questions, you can wrestle with Jesus' words along with me. First, we need to remember what Matthew has been writing in his gospel that has gotten us to this point. This section of scripture is sandwiched between Jesus' parable about the wandering sheep and the parable of the unmerciful servant – both are examples of reconciliation, grace, and forgiveness. What Jesus lays out here is a recipe for bringing the lost sheep back into the fold.

Some see these words from Jesus as a formula for conflict resolution, well maybe, but it is more than that. I think it's a method for getting humanity to places of reconciliation and restoration. “If your brother sins against you, go ahead and show him his fault, just between the two of you.” Jesus is telling his disciples to settle their differences in private – if someone harms you let them know – in private. It reminds me of what we learn in management. It is important to address problems in private. Or – take the mail to the right address - go to the offender and do not create “triangles.” This means we do not slink out into the parking lot and complain about someone or something in the church – if you have a problem with someone, go to that someone.

Maybe Jesus heard grumblings among the disciples, surely there were some disagreements especially after James and John asked to be given places of prominence when Jesus took the throne. If one of them had a problem with another, it would be appropriate to talk to the one they had a problem with, not everyone else in the group. The best way to avoid a problem escalating is to take your grievance to the source. Of course, Jesus is not addressing false accusations – but honest assessments of wrongdoing.

Jesus continues with another step, if that brother or sister does not listen to you take along two or three others so that “every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.” Now we see the matter escalate into something like an intervention – maybe these witnesses can help settle the issue, but is Jesus giving us permission to

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gang up on someone for a perceived wrong? Again, Jesus' instructions assume no one is bearing false witness against another. I suppose it is incumbent on those witnesses to ensure that both sides of a story are heard. Why else would Jesus give these instructions? Remember what Jesus has already told the disciples, "Your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost." Remember, Jesus is teaching this after he has instructed his disciples with the parable of the lost sheep whose message is that not a single person should be lost; no one is expendable; God intends for all to be saved.

The final step, and the one that trips us up in many cases is this, "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." For many churches and for many Christian leaders this statement is interpreted as a call to ex-communicate, ban, or cast out a member. It has even happened in this church where one member has asked the board to cast out another member for perceived wrongdoing. Is that how Jesus would treat a pagan or tax-collector?

When we consider that God intends for all to be reconciled to him and for the church to welcome all into the Kin-dom, what is Jesus really saying here – how has Jesus treated pagans and tax collectors and what is Jesus' main concern in these statements? I think I know the answer to that question, from what I read in scripture, Jesus treated people with compassion, mercy, and love. Jesus took his ministry to the pagans and tax collectors so that they too would be included in the Kin-dom of heaven. Jesus' ministry was inclusive not exclusive.

Jesus does not say for us to accuse in a manner such as, "Here is the sin, you are the sinner! Repent, or I will confront you with my two or three witnesses!" Truly can anyone of us even recognize "sin" anymore? What type of "sin" must the Christian confront in another, even while "sin" exists in our own lives? When we take this scripture in light of what Jesus is teaching his disciples, maybe the "sin" he refers to is what would affect the entire "body of Christ" or something that would turn non-believers away from hearing the good news of Jesus. Remember the sin could also be the sin of excluding someone from fellowship or refusing someone your hospitality; he could even be talking about the sin of falsely accusing another or judging others. I spoke recently with someone who believes but

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does not attend church because of all the “hypocrisy” among church members – maybe Jesus is teaching about the “sin” of hypocrisy.

The words that we read from the prophet Ezekiel this morning speak to this message as well. God appoints the “Son of Man” as a watchman to speak a word of warning. A watchman to enhance and witness to human life and human flourishing by delivering a word from God’s mouth to the wicked so that they do not die in their iniquity. God desires life, the church stands as a watchman in our world for the same purpose. The church’s goal is to point to God’s kin-dom and turn the wicked from their evil ways. If we do not address the wickedness we see, are we just as bad as the perceived evil? But there again is the trap of calling something wicked when there is mere disagreement.

Jesus isn’t done yet; he repeats something that he has told the disciples once before – “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Jesus is not telling the church that it controls heaven or that the will of the church becomes God’s will, he is reminding his followers that what is done honestly with compassion, mercy, love, and forgiveness is blessed by God in heaven. When a church community works together in humility and in accordance with Jesus’ teachings to deal with sin, reconcile relationships, or deal compassionately and mercifully with an unrepentant person, Jesus promises that their honest, biblical judgment matches God’s decision in heaven. Notice though that judgment must be in accordance with Jesus’ teachings and must be honest and biblical.

I think that we must also take the next two of Jesus’ statements within the context of this passage. Jesus is talking about the reconciliation of those who disagree and his statement reminds us that anything is possible when resolution leads to reconciliation and a restored relationship because, following his teachings, when that happens, He is there. Christ is there when the goal is reconciliation and restoring the lost sheep to the family of God. Christ is present when “sin” is dealt with compassionately, mercifully, and with forgiveness.

In his interpretation of this scripture, Douglas Hare writes, “When two alienated Christians, with or without a mediator, come together to work toward reconciliation despite all the anger and hurt that separate them, they are humbled and strengthened by the awareness that Christ is in

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their midst.”¹ Where two or three gather in Christ's name Christ is present – keeping that fact in mind is what makes the process of dealing with “sin” in the church aligned with our Christian values. Jesus' presence guides us and helps us hang in with each other.

When two of you get together to address disagreements, Jesus is there. When you pull in two or three others as witnesses, Jesus is there. Finally, when the issue comes to the church, Jesus is there guiding us to do the right thing. Jesus' concern is for the love we show each other, our neighbors, and our Father in heaven. Jesus' concern is for the salvation of the little ones, the lost sheep. God seems to be trusting the wisdom of the people who are striving faithfully to discern what should be done for the life of the church.

We don't go around slandering others in the congregation or badmouthing the church to others in the neighborhood – we stay at the table within a Christian community and treat each other according to God's will. As a final word to all of this I want to repeat what Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another. . . Love is the fulfillment of the law. And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.” Do not let disagreement or church conflict go unaddressed – God desires that all people will come to him – no one is expendable, every lost sheep should be restored to the kingdom.

Because we are CHURCH our disagreements should not be the subject of newspaper articles or court battles – Jesus desires that we work things out according to his will for the good of the full “body of Christ.” The Christian goal is not winning a disagreement but restoring relationships – because sometimes if we strive to win, we lose something more valuable.

What that means for this church is that we must work toward reconciliation of all relationships, even when disagreement has driven someone from the church we must continue to reach out – in that manner if the lost one continues to turn away it is their own choice. Ultimately who is in and who is out becomes a matter for God to decide, the church however, must continue to work toward reconciliation and restoration so all can reach the kin-dom of heaven.

¹ Hare, Douglas S. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching – Matthew*. WJK. 1993. Print. p.215